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AUTHOR Hawk, Patricia A.
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ABSTRACT

A multiple case study explored the personal perceptions and experiences of 15 women executives in the midwest who have made it to the top of their organizations. Questions were asked about: how they describe their management style; how they perceive their management styles as differing from those of their male counterparts; obstacles and challenges these women faced on their climb to the heights of their organizations; the role they believe gender played in their career experiences; factors they attribute to their success; the role that mentors play in their lives; and the advice they might give to women in management. Personal interviews were conducted with 15 female executives in higher education, state government, private corporations, and not-for-profit organizations in the Lincoln, Nebraska area. In the findings, five major themes emerged: (1) the majority of the informants characterized their management style as participative, with a work place that encouraged consensus building and collaboration; (2) challenges and obstacles they faced included juggling career and family, contending with gender bias, being the token woman at professional meetings, and being caught between generations and left out of the decision-making arenas; (3) critical factors included having a supportive spouse and family, hard work and passion, a college education, and being a risk-taker; (4) mentoring played an important role in their careers; and (5) they believe that women seeking top management need to develop a strong sense of self-awareness and confidence and cultivate a strong network and establish long-range goals. (BT)

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Lessons From the Top: Fifteen Women Who Have Made it Share Their Stories

A Multiple Case Study

by

Patricia A. Hawk
Doane College
Lincoln, Nebraska

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During the past 40 years, the American workplace has struggled through growing pains. Much to the surprise of this traditionally patriarchal society, Rosie the Riveter went to work to fulfill her patriotic duty and never went home.

Generations of women followed her example and by 2005 women will make up 47% of the total workforce. However, this 50-year commitment by women to the workplace has not earned them a significant role in top management. In 1992, women were represented in only 4.8 percent of top managerial positions in the United States (Fisher, 1992).

Research suggests that women's slow rise to the top may be the result of cultural stereotypes shared by men and women (Powell, 1988, Gallese, 1991, Chusmir, 1985). Research also addresses differences in the management styles of men and women.

Because the absence of women from top managerial positions has been obvious for only the past 20 years, research has been limited. By giving voice to women who have made a place for themselves at the top of the corporate ladder, my research will build on existing literature and lay ground work for further studies.

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the personal perceptions and experiences of 15 women executives in the Midwest who have made it to the top of their organizations. A top woman executive will be defined as a woman executive who holds a position of president, vice president, director or CEO.

The research questions addressed in this study included: How do top women executives describe their management style? How do they perceive their management style differs from that of their male counterparts? What obstacles or challenges did top women executives face on their climb to the highest levels of their organizations? What role do they perceive gender played in their career experiences? What factors do top level executive women attribute to their success? What role did mentors play in the personal lives and careers of women in top managerial positions? What advice would top executive women give to women seeking top management?

Personal interviews were conducted with 15 top female executives purposefully selected from higher education, state government, private corporations and other not-for-profit organizations in the Lincoln, Nebraska area. The findings were reported in narrative style using specific and detailed description.

Through the analytical process, five major themes emerged:

1. The majority of the informants characterized their management style as participative. They described their work place as one that encouraged consensus building and collaboration. They also noted that, in their experience, women managers were more likely than men managers to give credit where credit was due.

> *I am amazed what people will do if you just give them the tools and the equipment and the opportunity to go ahead. They really will not only surprise and amaze you by their ability to create appropriate solutions to problems, but they'll feel better about themselves.*

Although the informants did not agree on whether differences existed between men's and women's management style, several shared the view that their style most reflected a feminine perspective.

> *My style isn't necessarily different from a man's style, but more different from the style that is predominantly demonstrated by men.*

She used the metaphor of lines and curves to describe the distinction between the masculine and feminine style. Describing men's management style as "an instrumental straight line style." While describing women's management style as "*curvilinear.*" She believes women tend to focus on "connection and flexibility."

Nine informants mentioned an intentional effort to encourage their subordinates to improve and take the credit for their own successes.

> *I love helping people develop. I think that's one of the real pluses of the job and one of the real satisfactions is watching younger people take on projects, have fun with them and succeed.*

2. The challenges and obstacles many of the informants faced included: juggling career and family, contending with gender bias, being the token woman at professional meetings, being caught between generations and being left out of decision-making arenas.

When asked if men share equally with home responsibilities, informants responded this way...

> *[Men] don't do the laundry, take [the children] to the doctor's office, make their dental appointments, write out the lunch checks, they don't do the little things. My husband helps clean house, do laundry and does the dishes at night. He does a lot, but men think they can do one thing at a time, and I guarantee, they can do one thing at a time. If I go out of town, I say OK, here is what needs to be done while I'm gone. 'Oh, how am I going to get that all done?' I don't know, I do it every day, you drop this one off here, then you go pick this one up, then you go back and get this one.*

Twelve informants believed women face gender bias, specifically referring to the glass ceiling.

> *I can see it every single day. You start two people out with identical education's, one's a man, one's a women; unless that woman works her little tail off, that guy is going to climb faster.*

Informants shared a concern that younger women don't seem to be aware of the glass ceiling.

> *I have some real concerns about the young generation of women. Older women knew the doors were shut and so they would go pound on them until they would begrudgingly open and say OK, yes, I guess you can come in... So these women blasted these doors open. And people like me got through and were very successful, we proved ourselves, were are out here now, being examples and you know, that door is still open. But there is an invisible door that kind of swung shut and young women see that door as open... There are a lot of young women who have entered the workforce pretty naively. They say, 'I think things are fine, I make as much as he does.' Well, it's an entry level job. Wait until the gap gets big... So I think there are women out there that have yet to figure it*

> *out. And, I think we are partly at fault because we opened the door; but we didn't stand on that side of the door and say, 'Now when you come through here, remember this and this. We kind of took off like a herd of elephants.*

Four informants mentioned concern that they are still the only women at many of their meetings. They feel over-taxed by requests to be the "token-woman" on boards.

> *I am asked to take part in a variety of events, not necessarily for what I bring to them, but because of my position and because I'm a female.*

Many of the informants believed they were caught between generations. A 1990 article appearing in the Journal of Business Ethics supports this. The researchers found that women in management were strongly influenced by traditional societal expectations placed on them in their formative years.

> *I think I'm at that middle generational level where women ahead of me were going to be married and have families and women behind knew they had a choice to have a family or a career.*

Four of the informants specifically listed golf as a challenge for women. Many corporate decisions are made on the golf course and regardless of a woman's ability, she is simply not included.

> *Learn how to play golf. I mean I hate to say that but I have gotten excluded from so many things because I don't play golf. Now understand this, even though you know how to play golf, you may not get invited, but at least you have the opportunity.*

3. Critical factors that may have contributed to the success of these informants included: Having a supportive spouse and family, hard would and passion, a college education and being a risk-taker.

All of the informants were college educated. Ten of the 15 received a degree in teacher education and one in nursing.

Women were nurses, or women were teachers, so I was a teacher.

Fourteen of the fifteen informants described their spouse and family as supportive.

I have the world's most supportive husband. He has affirmed and sustained me in the pursuit of my career. In fact, he has compromised, in some respect, his own ambitions, to support me as I ascended the organizational ladder.

Nine of the informants believed that " hard work and passion" contributed to their success.

I think that in large part it had to do with working very hard at what I was doing at the time so that I did it very well. The reason that I became successful as a trial lawyer was that I simply out-worked the other people.

Nine of the 15 informants described themselves as risk-takers.

You can't spend all of your time worrying about why you're going to fail or is this going to work. you have to just be prepared to say OK, there are some things that are not going to work." "You have got to be juggling several balls so that when one or two of them fall, you've still got things going.

4. Mentoring played an important role in the careers of these informants. Although the majority of the informants believed their careers were influenced by some type of mentoring experience; there were few informants who believed their careers were shaped by the lack of mentoring.

Women are much more traditional within the teaching profession, so you'd have less need for a strong support group, because everybody around, looks like you.

I had no mentors. A lot of people recognized what I brought and helped give me opportunities. But I don't think I've ever had anybody who's really helped me succeed.

One informant made a distinction between relationship mentoring and skill-set mentoring.

There are a number of people that I have developed relationships with because of their skills, whether it be communication skills or marketing skills. But, I don't necessarily maintain a long relationship with that person unless personally we can become good friends.

5. The informants shared advice for women seeking top management. They suggested women need to develop a strong sense of self-awareness and confidence. They encouraged women to cultivate a strong network and establish long-range goals.

Seven informants mentioned that women need to know who they are and what they have to offer, in order to be effective leaders.

> *When I got the CEO position, I knew I got it because I produced, I had the leadership skills they wanted, I had the personality they wanted and all of the sudden, about three or four months after I had that job, I was miserable. I was not happy with anything... I thought what is different, what is wrong, and I realized I was trying to be this CEO that I had in my head, not me. I had totally lost myself. I had lost my spontaneity, my sense of humor. I was working so hard to get from this peer level to this President level, that I had forgotten to have fun and enjoy it and be spontaneous. So I thought, to heck with that, they hired me as this person, they are going to get this person. They hired me as this person & they are going to get this person.*

Eight of the informants suggested that networking and support systems are valuable in the pursuit of leadership positions.

> *I think it is really important that women build a strong support network. There are a lot of talented people in this world, but the person that gets the position, gets it because somebody else in the organization will say, "I think so and so could do that."*

> *Women cannot rely only on the official channel. They have got to have women out there who are committed to the advancement of other women; who are prepared to put their name forward and work on their behalf.*

Two informants specifically noted that women have a tendency to segregate themselves. They agreed that women need to move out of their comfort zone. In the early days of one informants career, 93% of the professionals with whom she associated were men.

> *It would have been easy for me to go and visit with the three or four other females, but, I didn't let myself do that. I learned how to move through a crowd where nobody really wanted to talk to me. You can't stay in your comfort zone.... So you just go up and say 'Hi, I'm Carol,' and they say, 'So what', but you get past that.*

One informant didn't understand why women tended to form women's groups when the power and authority are held by men. She believes it was silly for women to segregate themselves as if to say "Look how different I am."

> *Why would I create a woman's organization when my goal is to achieve or accomplish in a male hierarchy?*

However, the same informant did concede that women do need to support one another.

> *Talk to women. That doesn't mean you set yourself up with a separate organization, but you do need to network and talk and find out what worked and didn't work.*

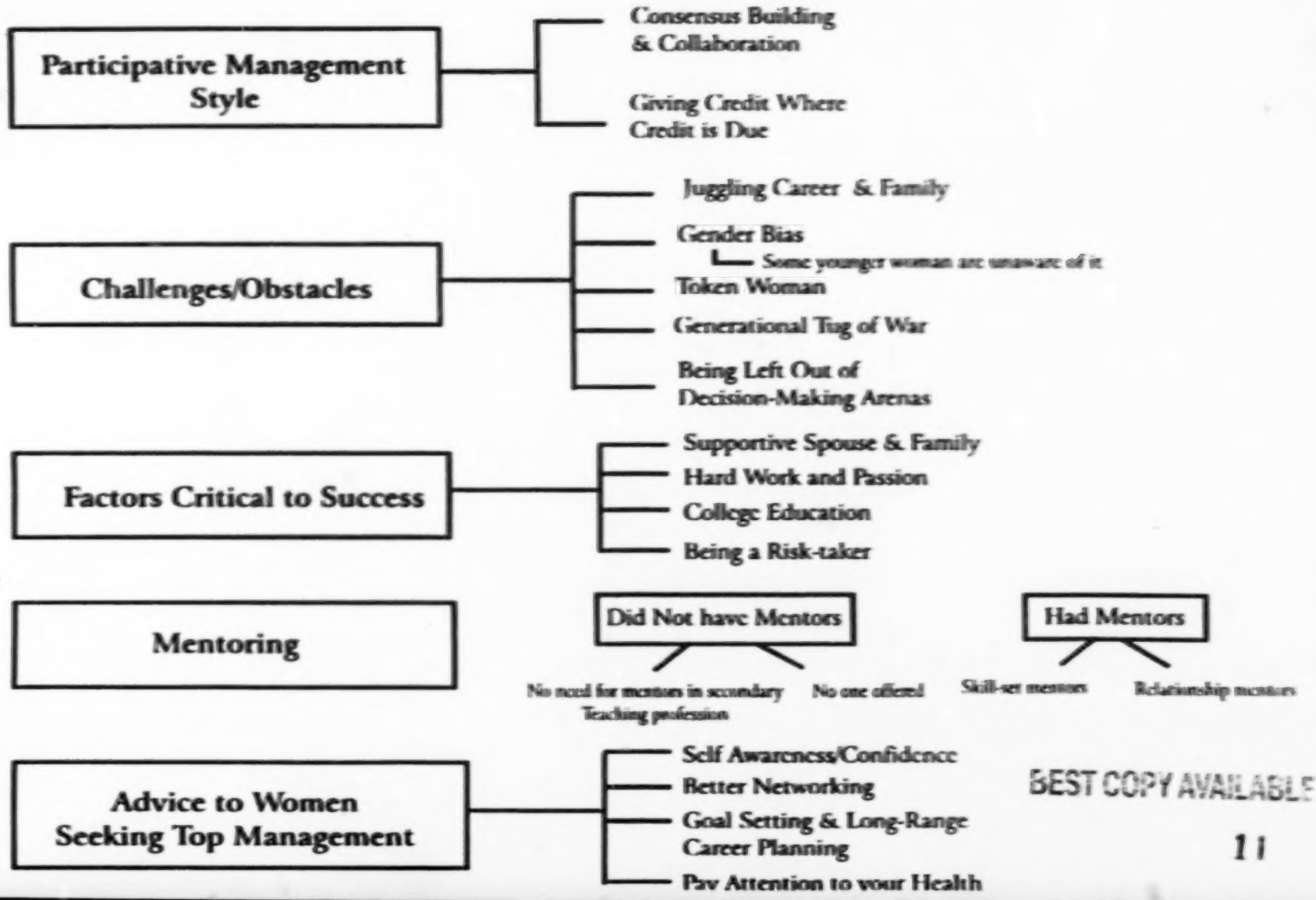
Seven informants observed that women need to set goals and do long-term planning. They noted that men do a better job of planning long-term.

> *I think a lot of women think much more short-term than men do. I was certainly one who just worked very hard at doing the current assignment and didn't worry about where I was going from there.*

This research has provided insight into the perceptions and experiences of women at the highest levels of their organizations. Since 95 percent of research to date has focused primarily on men managers, further study of women managers is essential.

The United States workforce is changing and women will undoubtedly move into top management in greater numbers. They will bring to America's boardrooms talents and insights unique to a feminine perspective. Organizations will gain a broader understanding and sensitivity to the needs of their constituents by adding new voices to the dialog.

TABLE 1



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